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ABSTRACT

The educational policy of the British Labor Party stresses the provision of quality education regardless of social class background. In a time of downward economic spiral, the Labor Party is committed to education for social justice through the redistribution of resources and research priorities, as well as the reorganization of the educational system. Budget decisions have redistributed funds from elite British universities to the comprehensive secondary schools and vocational colleges. Postsecondary reorganization involves efforts to merge the patch quilt of polytechnical schools, colleges of education, and colleges of further education under a single local authority. At the secondary level, comprehensive schools and semiprivate, direct grant schools are being merged to provide a strong alternative to expensive and exclusive private schools. Research and development funds are being shifted from open-ended cultural and scientific support to programmatic research designed to rescue a beleagured political economy. More money is being infused into trade union projects, workers' economic cooperatives, adult education programs, and vocational training. The belief is that worker incentives are critical to economic productivity and recovery. (Author/DE)

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BRITISH EDUCATION AT THE CROSSROADS

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SOCIAL JUSTICE OR EXCELLENCE?

BRITISH EDUCATION AT THE CROSSROADS

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In Britain today, Labor Ministers carry on the "long revolution" for social justice in the face of a downward economic spiral The British Labor Party unites evangelical, working class sentiment ("The Red Flag holds the People's Blood", sing delegates at every party conference) with an Oxford-dominated Cabinet. It is this improbable chemistry that has reshaped British education. Gone is the 'eleven-plus examination', that bulwark of educational discrimination by class origins. Now a state-maintained, comprehensive system receives vast sums of public money, while the ancient 'public schools' must rely on private support. The number of sixth-form (American high school) graduates doubled between 1963 and 1973, as did the number of full-time students in higher education. These are mighty accomplishments set against the backdrop of an "Upstairs-Downstairs" society in which five percent of the population control seventy percent of private wealth, and in which schooling at Eton and Cambridge remain key paths to elite status.

The core of Labor's education policy is the comprehensive school designed to provide quality education regardless of social class background (only thirty percent of British youth complete secondary school, a decade ago a mere fifteen percent graduated). The comprehensive school is the Socialist equivalent of the "public schools" in selecting the one in six students who will enroll in the higher educational system. Caught between the comprehensives and the "public schools" are the direct grant schools, such as Manchester Grammar, which are partially state-supported and of high academic quality. American equivalents of the British tripartite system are our prestigious private schools (Choate, Andover), our regular public school systems, and our high quality suburban systems (Newton, Alexandria, Santa Barbara), largely supported by property taxes

of upper-middle class residents. The fate of the "public schools" -- Labor's strategy is to neutralize, not nationalize, them -- and of the two different sorts of state schools are issuse that separate Labor from Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party, and, to a lesser extent, from Jeremy Thorpe's Liberal Party.

Labor's higher education policy is guided by the "binary principle", enunciated by Tony Crossland, a former Education Minister. The binary policy states that there will be two higher education systems at degree level; an autonomous sector of universities centrally funded through that ingenious conduit, the University Grants Committee, and a public sector of post-secondary vocational institutions (Polytechnics, Colleges of Education, Colleges of Further Education) jointly funded by central and local governments. During the 1960's, the demand of qualified school leavers for university places pushed expansion in the autonomous sector. The Robbins Report urged university expansion and became one of the few official reports in British history to be immediately implemented by the Government. A dozen new universities were opened, and the university student population doubled within a decade.

Cynics point out that universities were expanded in order to satisfy the growing professional class whose sons and daughters could not study at Oxford or Cambridge, and who sought an education updated but similarly prestigious. So the progeny of Lord Robbins were located in the cathedral towns of York and Bristol, rather than in the urban sprawl of Greater London and the West Midlands. Here the children of senior civil servants and university professors go to university. Social reform often benefits the professional class, that is to say, the sons and daughters of the reformers. More than professional self-interest is involved. British universities have never been working class institutions; they are highly selective, shaped by a history of academic tradition and social realities in a society where seventy percent of the labour force are skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled workers. British university graduates, regardless of class origins, are not attracted to industry and commerce in significant numbers. The cathedral town, then, is a suitable site for universities

devoted to high intellectual standards and an anti-vocational ethos.

In fact, the university expansion importantly increased opportunities for clever working class youngsters within the stratified confines of British society and its distinctive universities. When comparable indices of social class and academic quality of institutions are considered, the percentage of university graduates from working class backgrounds in Britain and America are about the same. Many American colleges are simply not universities in the British sense of the word, and our drop-out rates are much higher than in Britain where governmental student grants sustain the select minority. Nevertheless, the shape of the future was clear by the late 1960's: the continued decline of England's political economy and the Labor Government's use of education on behalf of the urban, working class majority presented a dilemma regarding universities and basic research.

ELIZABETH HOUSE AND THE EVERTON STRATEGY

Labor's efforts are directed toward holding on to hard-won social gains in a deteriorating economy--the so-called "Everton Strategy". Everton is one of the premiere teams of English First Division Football. Religious strife with cross-town rival Liverpool has subsided since the days when Evertonians upheld Irish-Catholic honor, and Liverpudlians stood for English-Protestant virtue. Today, big-time soccer combines money, passion, and skilled working-class players with the determination protrayed by Richard Harris in the movie "The Sporting Life". Evertin's strategy is simply not to lose. (Teams are awarded two points for each win, one point for each tie, and no points for each loss). Everton often plays for a tie, and unspectacular play is compensated by team success during the arduous ordeal of a nine month season.

Two hundred miles south of Lanceshire, the Department of Education and Science occupies Elizabeth House, a plateglass building adjoining Victoria Station, South of the Thames. The D.E.S. is not a working class institution, but Labor Party Ministers pursue the "Everton Strategy" with the tenacity of any "Scouser" on a Liverpool football pitch. Socialists, their advisors, and

civil servants are determined not to lose the hard-won gains of the long revolution. They, too, will play for a tie in the autumn of social class politics -- and for an unspectacular but inexorable movement toward equality. The Labor Government includes men and women who recall the class humiliation of an "eleven-plus" examination, the social differences between Eton or Winchester and Stoke Common School or Birmingham Comprehensive, and those upper-class voices heard not too long ago across the table at Cambridge or in an Oxford seminar. They are aware that there is little time and few resources for American-style task forces on educational innovation. "Our entire educational budget," observes an L.E.A. official in Yorkshire, "could be spent on new buildings and modern equipment". At the end of the day, a second- class economic power cannot afford the costs of university and research expansion, and modern mass education. Labor's policy is to fall back on the essentials of its program and support the comprehensive and public higher educational sectors. "If the choice is between an adult literacy program and an expensive physics project, then I wish our scientists luck in Brussels or in Washington", observes a senior D.E.S. official.

TWO CULTURES AND ONE BUDGET

The permanent revolution in British education unfolds through the "three R's" -- resources, reorganization, and research. Though the D.E.S. is cut off from the centers of governmental activity, physically separated from Whitehall across the Thames, its ministers reshape political power. Recent Education Ministers -- Tony Crossland (Labor), Edward Boyle (Conservative), and Reginald Prentice (Labor) -- have enlarged the department's staff so that it can deal effectively with the "money men" in Treasury and with educational pressure groups. Imagine that the Presidents of the leading public and private American universities, from Harvard to Berkeley, decided to give five percent of their combined budgets to the public schools. Imagine further that the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare reorganized community and state colleges into unified institutions. Complete this improbable scenario with a significant

transfer of research funds, for instance from projects sponsored by the National Science Foundation to projects sponsored by the A.F.L.-C.I.O. Executive Committee, and you approximate the changes in British education.

Under the leadership of Reginald Prentice, education's share of the 1974 budget increased by four percent despite the economic situation. English universities suffered a net loss of about twenty million pounds, or five percent of their combined budget during 1974-1975. While the public higher educational sector and the comprehensive system also felt the inflationary spiral, during 1973-1975 an additional twenty-three million pounds was made available to Local Educational Authorities for use in schools and Polytechnics. The sum of these budget decisions was to transfer the equivalent of fifty million uninflated American dollars from the universities to the rest of British education. No White Paper or Cabinet decision dectated this shift in resources commiting Elizabeth House to a long-range "Everton Strategy" in the persuasive language of pounds and shillings.

Another set of budgetary commitments reinforced D.E.S. policy. The key men in the public higher education sector are Polytechnic Directors, and the key actors in the comprehensive program are the headmasters of the state-maintained secondary schools. Both groups received an eleven percent salary increase -- in constant pounds -- during 1975, while Professors at the apex of British universities were suffering a net three percent salary decrease, in constant pounds. The salaries now awarded to Polytechnic Directors and Secondary School Headmasters often equal those of the Vice-Chancellor (in effect, "The President") of British Universities. The thrust is toward making employment in the public secotr more attractive than in the universities.

Reorganization is the second means being used to change the face of British education. The Department of Education and Science now contributes to the L.E.A.'s sixty-five percent of all funds available to non-university education, an increase of fifteen percent in London's share (for example) within three years. Capital improvements in excess of fifty thousand pounds for ed-

ucation must now be authorized by the Department of Education and Science, unless a Local Authority chooses the painful course of requesting increased local taxes. The D.E.S. is using its increased power to make the comprehensive schools the sole alternative to the expensive and exclusive "public schools". This means a long-term effort to merge comprehensives with direct-grant schools, a move resisted by middle-class supporters of the latter. In cities like Leeds and Manchester, direct-grant schools have become the centers of excellence and the gateway to universities and the professions. The power of these constituencies within the Labor Party has so far frustrated D.E.S. plans to merge the direct-grant and comprehensives into a unified state-maintained system.

Post-secondary reorganization involves efforts to merge the patchquilt of Polytechnics, Colleges of Education, and Colleges of Further Education co-existing within a single Local Authority. Consolidating these institutions into a unified public higher educational unit within each region and city more closely resembles a Continental model than the historic pluralism of central-local co-determination within the United Kingdom. The die has been cast toward both a unified comprehensive system below, and a unified public sector above, the watershed of the sixth form.

Further evidence of Labor's education policy is in the redistribution of research and development support. Although centers of basic research support remain influential in the interlocking realm of the Social Science Research Council, Science Research Council, and the Royal Society, the drift is from open-ended cultural and scientific support to programmatic research designed to rescue a beleagured political economy. Increasingly, Cabinet Ministers distribute so-called "science and research" funds. Labor Ministers, such as Michael Foote (Employment), Anthony Wedgewood Benn (formerly at Industry), and Peter Shore (Trade) used active "research units" to infuse funds into trade union projects, worker's economic co-operatives, adult education programs, and vocational training. The belief that worker incentives are critical to economic productivity is central to Labor's Industrial Relations Act and the partnership

between the private and public economies under Socialism. These policies complement D.E.S. plans in that direct "research grants" to trade unions at the workplace compensate for the absence of a completed sixth-form education among the majority of adult workers. Support of adult education and vocational courses are designed primarily for a smaller group who drop out after completing their secondary education. Higher education degrees, and hopefully better paying jobs, await those who complete their studies at the Polytechnics, Colleges of Education, and Colleges of Further Education.

"We are supporting these programs by living on the capital of our intellectual heritage", says a scholar with Labor Party attachments. The "heritage" is one shaped by generous support for speculative scientific investigation, characterized in the past by a pursuit of scientific problems without regard to short-term payoffs. The hallmarks of British science have been original discoveries, a pattern that still yields Nobel Prizes in specialties such as Astronomy, and merited membership in the Royal Society to medical researchers without any university affiliations. When theoretical physicists complain of meager support in the biological sciences, and when mathematicians speak of the drought in basic medical research, it is reasonable to conclude that there is warrented concern in the "invisible college" at the frontiers of British science. University Dons and science investigators worry that British intellectual capital will be expended on behalf of stop-gap projects that do not deal with the roots of national economic problems.

The drift in British educational policy poses a fundamental choice between "excellence" and "social justice". The judgement of a cultivated and socially humane Conservative Party spokesman on Education and Culture is clear enough:

> In the name of class justice, they (the Labor Party) level down every sign of intellectual creativity. It would be amusing to watch these Oxford graduates play "Working Class" were the consequences not so tragic.

This judgement is not supported by evidence regarding university expansion after the Robbins Report when, despite forbodings about levelling among senior, British academics, the number of "A" Level (university qualified) students increased by about twenty percent. However, contemporary concern about the decline of British "high culture" is valid consideration. British intellectual quality has always depended upon the fruits of the university tutorial, the solid curriculum of the sixth form, and mature scientific research and scholarship. Above all, the idea of a British university, now that concentration in a single subject has been discarded, is carried forth by broad-gauged graduates at home in the community of scholars and public affairs. One need not romanticize the old equalities of a class-biased educational system to regret the erosion of an erudite culture.

Against this stands Labor's commitment to educating a self-governing citizenry of productive men and women in times of economic distress. It is ironic to observe these Ministerial "Cavaliers" (sophisticated intellectuals au courant with the world of ideas) execute "Roundhead" policies -- bricks and mortar for the comprehensives, programs in industrial design for the Polytechnics, concern with the education of the least skilled and literate everywhere. At the end of the day, this is an honorable choice undertaken without the hypocracy about "affirmative action" and the shrill rhetoric about "equality" heard in America.

It is fitting that R. H. Tawney, the architect of Labor's commitment to educational justice, have the last word:

> If persons whose work is different require different kinds of professional instruction, that is no reason why one should be excluded from the common heritage of civilization of which the other is made free by a university education....Those who have seen the inside both of the lawyers' chambers and of coal mines will not suppose that of the inhabitants of those places of gloom the former are more constantly inspired by the humanities than are the latter, or that conveyancing is in itself a more liberal art than hewing.*

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* R. H. Tawney, "An Experiment in Democratic Education", THE POLITICAL QUARTERLY, May, L914